

# The Gazette

## Council weighs higher tobacco tax to fund health care

The County Council introduced a resolution to support increasing the state's tobacco tax to provide health care to uninsured and underinsured Marylanders.

The plan, which has been kicking around Annapolis for the past few

years and backed by Democratic gubernatorial candidate Douglas M. Duncan, would increase the tax by \$1 on each pack of cigarettes. The revenues projected at \$211 million a year, would be used to expand the HealthChoice medical program for families who earn less than \$19,350 per year. The money also would go to efforts to reduce teen smoking.

The full council is scheduled to vote on the resolution next week. The plan was sponsored by the council's Health and Human Services Committee — George I. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park, Steven A. Silverman (D-At large) of Silver Spring, who is running for county executive, and Thomas E. Perez (D-Dist. 5) of Takoma Park, who is running for Maryland attorney general.

But the proposal has been criticized for leading to increased out-of-state tobacco sales, which could hurt small businesses that sell tobacco products.

Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley, who is also running for governor, has not released a health care plan yet. But Del. Anthony G. Brown, O'Malley's running mate, said Monday that their plan would include an insurance pool for small businesses, similar to how the state helps small businesses with workers compensation.

"We believe in the employer health care system," Brown told the Rockville/Mid-County Democratic Breakfast Club.

Brown said he wished the ticket's health plan was already on the streets. "But it's getting eyes on it so it's rational and it's effective," he said.

### In other action

•County will pay its part of Clarksburg mediation: The County Council unanimously agreed Tuesday to pay up to \$67,366 as the county's share of mediation costs following an investigation into zoning violations in the Clarksburg Center. The county's payment will be spread over two years because some of the bills are not expected until after the beginning of the new fiscal year on July 1.

•No decision yet on workforce housing: The council began discussion of a workforce housing plan sponsored by Silverman. The plan would require more affordable housing units, in addition to the required moderately priced dwelling units, in most new developments around Metro stations. Marilyn J. Praisner (D-Dist. 4) of Calverton and Perez questioned the viability of the plan in light of the MPDU requirements and any possible unintended consequences for developers and the county. The council continues discussion of the plan next week.

•Easier rules for taxi drivers: Perez and Leventhal introduced a bill that temporarily modifies the application process for taxicab drivers to receive identification cards. County taxi fleets have reported a shortage of new drivers. The bill would allow the county to issue temporary ID cards before drivers pass a required test and delay a requirement for federal background checks for 18 months. A public hearing is scheduled for 1:30 p.m. July 11.

### On leave

Chief county spokesman David S. Weaver is taking leave from his job in the county's public information office to work on Duncan's gubernatorial campaign. The leave began June 5. Weaver is on accumulated paid leave from the county through the next two weeks, and then will be paid by the campaign. Donna Bigler, assistant public information officer, is heading the office in Weaver's absence.

### Hat in the ring

County school board member and former council aide Valerie Ervin officially announced her campaign for County Council District 5 on Monday, surrounded by a host of politicians and civic leaders. Ervin will face Hans Blumer, political director of Rock the Vote, in the Democratic primary.

Staff Writer Douglas Tallman contributed to this report.